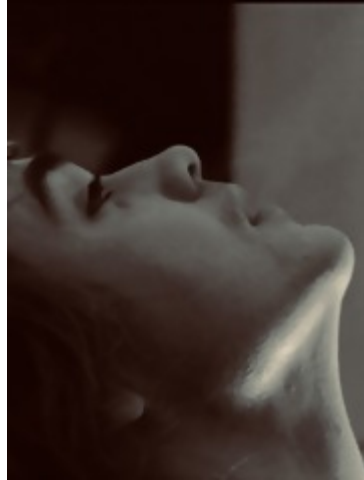




How Billy Hargrove's Redemption Arc Should Have Ended by TOWRTA

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How Billy Hargrove's Redemption Arc Should Have Ended

He woke to the smell of coffee and feeling like his innards had been ripped out and replaced with jelly. Through holes in his torso. With great vigour.

He groaned.

"Ah, good morning." Nice voice. Competent, unruffled, indulgent. Adult male. The type of voice there was little chance of coming across in his way of life. He turned his head towards it, felt the agony of the pillow slip scraping against his skin, and tried to open his eyes. When they opened only a hair's breadth and the harsh white light of fluorescent tubing stabbed into his retinas, he realised what must have happened. He'd been in a fight and taken to hospital. Probably had two black eyes from the feel of it. Closing them didn't stop the stinging of the light. It remained, pulsating and strobing with his heartbeat.

He sniffed. The coffee smelled good. And he had the mother of all hangovers pounding on his brain. He moaned the word at the person to see if they might take pity. It might have hurt him to stoop so low as to beg, but at that moment he couldn't care less. Everything hurt.

"Sorry, son, no coffee for you. Testing caffeine's effects on critically injured patients is not how I want to start my day."

Bastard, he thought.

"We'll have you fixed up soon enough. We'll stop the haemodialysis this afternoon and see how you fare. If you're up to it, you might even have some visitors tomorrow. There are two young ladies who especially want to see you."

Normally, he'd be wishing to be left alone to sleep off his misery. But, somehow, he didn't mind this man talking. His voice was soothing, like a bed time story, and borne on the waves of inflections and intonations, he drifted off into the depths of sleep.

He dreamed of seagulls and sand and waves. Laughter. Happy, bright things. It was nice and had the taste of déjà vu about it. It seemed to him like he hadn't had much chance for happiness lately. He welcomed the change.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"He'll be fine. He's a strong young man, he'll pull through no doubt. We'll keep him under observation until the end of the week though. Make sure everything's out of his system."

"If I could still . . ."

"It's okay. The doctors will take care of him."

"We're more than indebted to you already, Miss Eleven. Let us regular folk have a chance for a change."

"Okay."

"Good. Our boy's awake."

"Billy?" A hand, small, calloused, touched his and he hissed through his teeth as the pressure made his whole arm throb. The hand released him, the girl – Max, he'd recognise his irritating step-sister's voice anywhere – said, "Sorry!"

Then different fingers touched his left cheek.

Tears sprung to his eyes. Where had *those* come from? What the hell? Why was he getting emotional about some stranger touching him? If he had the strength, he'd be shoving them away –

"Thank you, Billy. You saved me."

It was *her*. The phantom, the enemy, the memory walker, the prey.

Tear-stained, choked-out words from a person who understood. "She was really pretty."

It came back. All of it. Every last gruesome second.

Billy opened his mouth and screamed.

It was Monday. Ten days after he met what they called the Mind Flayer. Ten days after he learned that what he'd thought was Hell was only a taster for the real thing. Four days after he was stabbed through the chest by a monster made of melted people that he helped create.

How many people had he killed? How many lives destroyed by missing family members, as his had been?

How long until the taste of death left his mouth?

Billy Hargrove lay on his hospital bed, hands carefully manoeuvred to pillow his head because he'd had stab wounds before – though none as big or gnarly as these – and he knew ripping his stitches would be beyond stupid. He wanted to heal and be done with this place. He wanted to get in his Camaro and drive as far and as fast as he could.

Actually, no. No, he didn't want to get in that Camaro ever again. Behind that wheel, he'd see himself crashing into the steelworks, being dragged down, down, down to his doom.

He'd see himself driving top speed towards Wheeler and Byers and those children who had visited him yesterday. (If staring around the corner of his door with wide, curious eyes counted as visiting, while his sister dropped off spare clothing to replace the shredded wifebeater and stained jeans. His boots were a lost cause. He knew and hated that he knew what the black gunk coating the leather was.)

If he got behind that wheel, he'd fear Harrington crashing into him at top speed. That jolt and spin. That drop of his stomach because he was meant to be safe in his car and right then he had no control at all.

No. He wasn't going to drive the Camaro again, not for a long while. Besides, Byers told him it was busted. His dad was going to kill him.

He laughed, out loud, almost hysterical, in the small confines of his private room on the top floor of the Hawkins Medical Hospital, because how could he possibly be afraid of his father – a mere man – after what he'd been through? The idea was ridiculous.

And, in that moment, Billy Hargrove felt free. A weight lifted from his shoulders. He didn't have to fear his father. He didn't even have to listen to the man anymore. He didn't have to give him the time of day.

Oh, he hadn't felt this good in . . . *forever*.

"Oi, Hargrove, you're not cracking up are ya?"

The good mood didn't dissipate. In fact, it was so intoxicating that Billy grinned at Harrington. Harrington looked disturbed. He stood in the doorway, holding a pair of beat up adidas sneakers. White with black lines.

"Your sister said you needed some. How come you don't own any?" he said.

"Because *men wear boots*." Billy laughed again. Harrington was so unsettled that Billy laughed harder, but it hurt him everywhere and he had to stop. Serves him right. First time he laughs genuinely in years and he has to stop because of puncture wounds by a supernatural people-beast.

"Right," muttered Harrington. "I'm gonna leave these here." He stepped in, sidling more like, and left the shoes beneath the solid black chair that held Billy's replacement clothes. He should change into them at some point. But Billy was enjoying the freedom of the hospital gown and the freedom of not caring what anyone thought of him, not even his old self.

"So that's what it was like," said Harrington under his breath.

Billy raised an eyebrow. "What?"

Harrington shrugged, not looking at him. "After I saw the Demogorgon, I couldn't look at life the same way anymore. I'm guessing it's the same for you. It's hard to act like who you were

when the whole world's turned on its head, huh?"

"Yeah . . ." Billy drew out the word, low and slow, contemplative. Harrington, with his banged-up face and swooping hair was suddenly different to who he was ten days ago. Or maybe Billy was. Whatever the case, the world had definitely turned on its head because Billy, even as the laughter faded, couldn't find it in him to hate the guy. Instead, Billy remembered what he'd heard about him – the jerk of a father, the fall from popularity, his helping save the world three times now . . .

Other than Byers, Harrington was also the only guy on the planet his own age who could possibly understand what Billy was going through and that made him interesting. Very interesting.

Harrington shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. "Anyway, I better get going." Yet he hesitated at the threshold and glanced over his shoulder. Billy waited, watching. Old habit; remain stoic and smug and others feel pressured into making the first move, causing him to appear in control by default.

He swore inwardly. That was what his old man did. Damn it, how many more of that bastard's behaviours had he unthinkingly absorbed as his own over time? Did he *want* to become like the man who'd pushed his mother away, the best woman in existence?

Hell no was he perpetuating Neil Hargrove's special brand of psycho any longer. Let the old man could stay sunken in his ways like some sort of animal, trying to scare the world into submission. But Billy had seen too much now to believe that you could get life to bow down to you. There were some things that couldn't be bullied or threatened. Some things were higher in the food chain and there was nothing you could do about it.

In the scheme of things, he was really no better than Steve Harrington. If he was honest with himself, living a life of constantly trying to one up the next person to come along, to prove himself as strongest, fearless, without competition, while in the back of his mind he knew that there were creatures that could consume him body and soul, not caring about him or his past or his future, that could destroy him in an instant . . . It sounded pointless. Really, really pointless.

Like pigs rolling around in the mud.

Nah. He couldn't care less about his father's standards or that whole dog-eat-dog-world crap. He wanted his mother again, laughing with him under the bright Californian sun.

He wanted Eleven to touch his cheek and show him she understood.

He wanted his sister to look at him without fear.

He wanted to be loved.

"Got a place I could crash for the night, Harrington?" he drawled, cutting off whatever Harrington was about to say.

Harrington gaped. Blinked. Shook his head and his big flop of hair. "Uh," said Harrington. "Eleven is staying with the Byers tonight. After Hopper – her dad – Your sister's there too, I think."

"Oh yeah? They got a couch?" Billy heard him say it and couldn't quite believe it but he was committing to this, damn it, and Billy was nothing if not determined once he set his mind on something. Whether it be girls or a job or kicking down the top dog of whatever new hierarchy he'd entered into, Billy always achieved his goals.

New goal: be the man his *mother* would want him to be, not his father.

That meant staying away from Neil Hargrove for a few days to let this conviction really set in. Once he was ready, he'd go home – hah, home, was that what he called that house? – and face the man who once was his terror.

"Mrs Byers is real nice," Harrington mused, still shaken.

"Cool. Mind asking her? Tell her I'd appreciate some time away from home. Max and El should be able to explain it to her."

"Uh, sure?"

"Thanks, Harrington."

"No problem." Harrington left, muttering to himself too low for Billy to hear the individual words, but loud enough to hear the confusion and healthy dose of scepticism. Billy couldn't begrudge him that. He'd be sceptical too.

So, he was going to Jonathan Byers' house for the night. Well.

The world really had turned on its head.

Byers came to pick him up, swinging his keys around and around his finger in nervous habit as he waited for Billy to drag on Harrington's sneakers. Somehow, Max had managed to find the exact clothes Billy had worn on his first day of school at Hawkins High. He wondered if she'd done it on purpose, because he knew he'd tucked the crew neck t-shirt into the bottom of his drawers.

Billy adjusted his mother's necklace of the Virgin Mary, darkened and smoothed by time and his own habit of rubbing it when in thought.

"Ready to go?" said Byers. Billy had already signed out an hour ago in preparation for leaving. All that was left . . .

Billy picked up the pack of cigarettes Max had left for him on the bedside table.

"Hate the things. Death sticks, I call them," said Doctor Owens. "A paper filed in the fifties reported how they cause nearly every cancer known to man – lung cancer worst of all – and yet, thirty years later, people still smoke them. Take my advice. If you want to keep that nice voice of yours, son, and not end up hacking your lungs out of your trachea before you hit fifty, you'll stop smoking. You escaped death once. You pick up a cigarette, you're walking back to it with open arms."

Billy put the packet down. "Let's go."

Byers gripped his keys in his fist and walked out and down the hall, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched. Billy followed stiffly. The sneakers shuffled across the linoleum floor as he struggled to put one foot in front of the other. He didn't care. He was leaving. Aches and pains weren't going to keep him in this antiseptic prison for another

day. He wanted to *breathe*. To taste fresh air for the first time, to have the brilliantly red blood flowing through his veins filled with oxygen that didn't come recycled through a ventilation system.

They passed the two nurses who had attended to him, one a red head, the other brunette. They wished him a safe recovery. The woman at the desk gave him an awkward *get well soon* nod, that encompassed the blue-purple-yellow bruises across his face and the way he held his arms close to his chest. Protecting the stab wounds.

He steeled himself and let his arms drop as Byers led him into the silver elevator.

Muzak filled in for the lack of conversation as they descended. What was there to talk about? Byers had said his mother was happy to have Billy over and he was there to pick him up and that was that. Billy had already been filled in on the details of the last two years by El and Max, and that included Byers and Nancy Wheeler's sleuthing escapades. There seemed no other point of commonality between them. Billy and Byers had never talked until today.

Finally, the elevator opened and they passed the glass and linoleum and green painted walls of the reception area and they were *out*. In freedom. Fresh air. Billy stopped. The hot evening washed over his face. It was summer. School was out. Life was endless possibility to someone not afraid anymore and it seemed to him that even the environment was celebrating. The smell of grass cuttings and the flowers under the windows and the thick tang of melting asphalt wafted together. The trees across the road swayed in the trickle of a breeze, sending long shadows over the car park. Sunset was a while off, but the trees meant the yellow sun hovered just over the false horizon and soon the hospital would be in twilight.

"Come on," called Byers, already at his brown slab of a station wagon.

Billy creaked into motion again and slid into the passenger seat. Without thinking, he curled his fingers around the fake leather and held tight. Byers noticed, twisted his mouth, didn't comment. He started the car and they drove off.

Billy was used to doing things on his own, with his father's presence

always hovering in the back of his mind. Now, being driven to the Byers house – which he hadn't been to since that fight with Steve Harrington and Max's stunt with the syringe, which she never explained how she got a hold of – he felt alone. Alone in his own mind. Sure, he had bad memories, but . . . he didn't feel controlled. He didn't feel constrained.

He felt like himself.

"Look," said Byers. Billy glanced at him. He wasn't a good-looking guy, so how he ended up with Nancy Wheeler was a puzzle to Billy for a while there. After the girls' explanations, though, it made sense. Nancy Drew and her trusty photographer.

"I know you've been through . . . a lot. Max told us about your dad." Byers swallowed. He had this look in his eye that was both anxious and unwavering. Billy knew what was coming before it was said.

"If you hurt a hair on any one of those kids' heads, you won't live to see the next sunrise."

"I'm not going to touch them."

"I mean it."

"Yeah, I got it. Seriously, man, you think I'm coming to your house to beat up a bunch of kids? I just don't want to go home."

"Why?"

Billy frowned. Time to put his newfound ideology into words. "My old man's a bastard and I'm sick of being like him. Figured I could use some rehab, you know?"

"Oh." Byers shook his head, and of all things, he chuckled. "I can understand that."

Billy frowned. That's right, Byers' dad had skipped out a while back. What was the story there? he wondered.

Billy left that to mull over another day and focused on the pine trees streaming past. He missed California like anything, but Hawkins had

a certain charm to it. Nestled deep in these forests, it was a little oasis away from the hustle and bustle of big city America. A place for people to come to live at a slower pace of life.

The grey strip they drove along twisted and turned through its green corridor, its mirror image a sky that grew paler by the minute. It was almost white, with hints of blue and yellow and orange streaked together. His mother used to paint in watercolours. She'd let the colours merge and flow into one another. He loved watching her work, when his father was out of the house and it was just Billy and Mom, listening to old jazz music that his mother sang along to. She knew every song.

Byers turned off and they were driving along a dirt road, juddering in and out of potholes baked hard and dry in the heat. At last, their rundown, one storey house came into view. Two cars were parked in front of it already. One of them was Harrington's BMW 733i. The other, Billy guessed, was Mrs Byers'. It was a '76 Ford Pinto, after all, a cheap car if you could ever one after the scandal around their exploding gas tanks and the 1978 recall.

They got out, Byers with his keys, Billy with nothing but his arms held to his stomach as an unconscious protective measure again. This was going to become a habit, wasn't it?

"Looks like the whole gang's here," said Billy wryly. Byers said nothing. He led the way up the creaking front steps onto the porch and knocked.

The door was opened by one of the smallest women Billy had ever seen. It wasn't just her height; it was the very size of her. Billy could snap her like a twig.

Which he wouldn't, because he didn't think that way anymore. That was his father's way of thinking.

"You must be Billy," she said, smiling. She had huge, anxious eyes, underscored by steel. He saw where her son got his look from.

"You must be Mrs Byers," he replied, and he held out his hand to shake. She took it, shook twice – she was so *small* – and then gestured

at the dark interior of the house. Billy went in first, Byers after him, and the door shut with a final *thunk* and Billy was trapped in a room with the entire Scooby Doo crew, sans Hopper, who left his mark in the lack of his very large, disapproving presence. His memorial had been yesterday, Billy was told. The entire town turned out.

The rest of them were there. The four boys, his sister, Eleven, Nancy Wheeler and Harrington, along with Byers and his mother. Most of them were arrayed over the two fraying couches and the floor and they stared at him with suspicion in their eyes and tension in their limbs. Could he blame them?

He sighed inwardly, the reality of what he decided on setting in finally. This wasn't just about his father. This was about *them* too. All the kids at school, the police, the town. This group. Among them he had a reputation that had to be torn down and rebuilt brick by brick and it wasn't going to be easy.

It was simple to *become* the bad boy. People expected to be disappointed after all. But to reverse it you had to face suspicion and the expectation that you would, one day, screw up again and they could clap their hands and say *that's that. We knew it wouldn't last.*

Then Eleven smiled and waved and said, "Hi, Billy," and Billy was surprised into briefly smiling back. The girl unfolded from her place between Mike Wheeler and Max, limped around the coffee table, and came to stand in front of him under the eyes of everyone else. "How are you?"

"Sore," he said.

"Join the club, buddy," said Harrington. He was lounging on one of the couches, Henderson at his feet. He occasionally flicked the kid's ear despite the kid's mutters of, "Oi, cut it out!" and didn't even seem to realise he was doing it.

"This is weird, right?" Sinclair whispered loudly to Mike Wheeler. Mike nodded. On Sinclair's other side, Byers' little brother stared unerringly with his mother's huge eyes. It was, if Billy had to admit, kind of creepy. Nancy and Byers gravitated towards each other and watched the proceedings without a word.

This was perhaps the oddest situation he'd been in, but not in the least the scariest or most uncomfortable. Billy felt almost at ease.

"Have you had dinner?" asked Mrs Byers, coming to his elbow.

"Not yet."

"We're about to have lasagne."

Billy forced away the reflexive urge to flirt. He said, "Sounds good. Do you need any help?"

"No. Nancy, Jonathan, do you mind helping set the table?"

"Sure."

"No problem."

The two passed him without looking at him, and he wondered what conversation they'd had when his request to stay had been announced by Harrington. *Attacked Sinclair and Harrington, kidnapped dozens of people, tried to crush Nancy to death with his Camaro, tried to sacrifice El to the Mind Flayer . . .* In fact, it was incredible Byers was even letting him into the house. It made Billy doubt the guy's preservation instinct.

"You look tired," said El. Billy's attention snapped back to her.

"Being an agent of the Mind Flayer takes a while to recover from," said a quiet voice. "You'll feel better in a week or so."

"Will," Sinclair hissed in protest.

Will Byers ignored him. "How did it feel?" he asked. "When he was inside of you?"

"Hot," Billy replied shortly. "Like death warmed over. And like I could lift the entire world."

Will nodded. "I felt powerless and powerful at the same time. He was eating away inside me, but somehow I felt stronger than ever."

The rest of them were looking at Will now, with varying levels of surprise.

"He becomes everything to you. Everything you can think about. It's like a religion. You have to do what he says because he is you." Will frowned. "But . . . you're still you. And that's the worst part. Because you can still feel your own emotions, have your own thoughts. They've just been twisted around his finger."

"That's what Billy's dad does," El said simply. Billy bristled, and everyone stared at him now, and El continued, "But he won't any more. Because Billy isn't going back to his dad."

"What?" said Max. "What do you mean? Billy, where are you going?"

"He's going to stay here. With Mrs Byers and Will and Jonathan and me."

To say the room exploded was an understatement.

TOWRTA: Here's how I wish Stranger Things 3 had ended. I mean, Billy Hargrove was such an interesting character - one of the most interesting of all the characters in the series (apart from Eleven and Steve). He had so much potential to change, to grow into a man his mother could be proud of! (sobs quietly to oneself)

I get why the Duffer Brothers did it - he wasn't the main focus of the series. But Steve wasn't either! And look how well that turned out when they said 'oh wait, he could be a good guy!' Couldn't they do the same for Billy? People like happy endings . . .

So, anyway, this is more a set up for a possible longer story - if you feel inspired to continue this, go for it. If you want to see lots of h/c, reconciliation, Billy becoming a policeman or El's older brother or Sinclair's partner in crime, do it! I don't mind. I can't write any more because I don't have time among my other projects, but I had to write at least this much.

Hope you enjoyed :)